

**Sixth Sunday of Pentecost
July 11, 2004
1 Kings 19:14-21**

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The Contrasts of Discipleship

1. Hardship – Glory
2. Weakness – Power
3. Loneliness – Fellowship

^{NIV} 1 Kings 19:14 He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."¹⁵ The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel-- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."¹⁹ So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.²⁰ Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye," he said, "and then I will come with you." "Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?"²¹ So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.

Fellow Disciples of Jesus,

According to a biography of Sir Ernest Shackleton, the famous explorer ran the following ad in the London *Times* before his 1914 expedition to the South Pole: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in event of success." The story is that despite

the seemingly discouraging wording of the ad, Shackleton received 5,000 applications from men who wanted to be part of his expedition. More recently, though, the veracity of this story has been challenged, since no one has been able to find such an ad in back issues of the *Times*.

What would you think about an ad for Christianity that read like this: "Wanted: Men, women, and children for a heavenward pilgrimage of hardship, weakness and loneliness. Cross-bearing inevitable. Persecution and long periods of loneliness possible. A gracious reward of heavenly glory for those who remain faithful to Christ until death"? That's not usually how we present the Christian faith, is it? We tend to focus on the joy, peace and hope that we have in Christ. We talk about the comfort and the strength that we find in God's promises. And rightly so. These are some of the great blessings of being a believer in Jesus. But it's also true, isn't it, that the Bible discloses that Christian will endure hardships and may face persecution?

So it's both, then, isn't it? The life of a disciple of Jesus Christ is a study in contrasts. We see those contrasts in 1 Kings 19 where the lives of two great Old Testament prophets intersect. What we read here helps us to think about what we ought to expect as people who are Jesus' disciples. The life of a disciple is a life of contrasts: 1) Hardship and glory; 2) weakness and power; and 3) loneliness and fellowship.

1. Hardship - Glory

Here in 1 Kings 19 we catch the prophet Elijah at one of the lowest moments in his ministry. This faithful prophet of the LORD, this mighty opponent of the idol, Baal, has had enough. He's hiding out far from Israel, down at Horeb, that is, at Mount Sinai, where God had appeared to Moses centuries before. Elijah is done. He wants God to take his life. Whatever Elijah has been doing isn't working. *"I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too."* By this time the LORD has already granted Elijah a revelation of his power in a violent wind and a powerful earthquake and a blazing fire. And the LORD has attempted to show Elijah that he sometimes chooses to work through just a gentle whisper, the gospel, but Elijah is stubborn in his despair. His answer here is the same answer he gave the first time the Lord asked him what he was doing there at Mt. Sinai. Elijah didn't say it, but it was pretty plain: In the face of all those hardships, he'd given up.

Let's be fair to Elijah. His call from God wasn't easy. He was to prophesy to the Northern Kingdom at a time when nearly the whole country was in the grip of Baal worship. It had been Elijah's duty to inform Israel that God was punishing their unbelief with a three-year drought—not just lower than average rainfall, but no rainfall at all. Not even any dew! As a result of all this, Israel's King Ahab and his wife, Queen Jezebel, harbored a powerful hatred for Elijah and named him Public Enemy #1. They wanted Elijah dead.

Even if we haven't been called to prophesy to a country of hardened idolaters, I think we can relate. We've all faced hardships, some more than others, perhaps, but we all have our hardships. It might be illness or grief or frustration. It could be difficulties at home or at work or at school. No one is exempt. It says in the Bible that as St. Paul was closing out his first missionary journey, he and Barnabas went back to some of the cities in which Christians had begun to gather and they encouraged the Christians there to remain true to the faith. At each place their message was the same: **"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."** (Acts 14:22) God never promised that our journey heavenward was going to be a Princess cruise. What Jesus did say was, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."** (Mt. 16:24) We live as Christians under the cross. Anyone who thinks that once we become Christians we embark on a never-ending series of triumphs in every aspect of our lives hasn't been reading the Bible carefully. There are still hardships.

But there's also the contrast. Don't lose sight of the glory. I think that's what happened to Elijah. Do you know that Elijah's time on this earth ended in glorious fashion? The LORD took him to heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by the chariots and horsemen of Israel. He went to heaven without dying. But Elijah, while he sat under that tree at Horeb, couldn't have pictured such glory. But it's there, even in the midst of our hardships. We have a glorious identity as the children of God through faith in Jesus. Our life, the Bible says, is hidden with Christ in God, but this glorious union with our Savior is a reality even now. We possess a glorious hope, the confidence that one day, by faith, the angels of God will carry us home to heaven where we'll join the throng of saints and angels gathered around throne of the Lamb. This is glory that no hardship can nullify.

I get the impression that Elijah could have endured the hardships if only he could have seen some results from his efforts as a prophet.

His hopes were perhaps raised by the LORD's great victory over the prophets of Baal in that contest on Mt. Carmel, but then they were dashed immediately by Jezebel's threat to kill Elijah. His complaint was, *"I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty."* But his zealous efforts seemed for naught: *"The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword."* Elijah's unspoken assumption was, "If I'm doing things God's way, then God ought to reward me by letting me see some success from my efforts." He wanted to see God's power at work on account of his efforts. But instead he saw wrecked altars and dead prophets. It all seemed so weak. This is the second of our contrasts—the contrast between weakness and power.

2. Weakness – Power

In his near despair, Elijah seemed to be thinking, "LORD, we're down to just one believer here. Something's not working." And Elijah's got some company when it comes to that frame of mind. Have you ever thought for just a moment, "This Christianity thing just isn't working"? It might be that our best efforts at making some improvements in our lives aren't meeting with dramatic success. It might be that our attempt at elevating our own level of sanctification has been less than the success we hoped for. We long to see a display of God's power at work to right the wrongs and turn failures into success—and it doesn't happen, at least not on our timetable. That's when those doubts about God's power or the power of his Word can intrude.

We see here, though, that Elijah was throwing in the towel too early. He had lost patience with what he perceived to be God's powerlessness, when in reality he just hadn't waited long enough. But the LORD is still patient with Elijah. He said, *"Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus."* God was about to move into action to punish wickedness and sin and give hope to those who were looking to him for relief. Elijah was instructed to anoint three people as God's servants: Hazael as king of Aram (Syria), Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as Elijah's successor as prophet. Together they were going to be God's international team to root out the worship of Baal in Israel. "D-Day" had arrived at last. The longed-for display of God's power was coming soon.

We also need to be reminded at times of the kind of power God has put at our disposal. The gospel of Jesus Christ with its soul-restoring message of forgiveness is still God's power to save people. Jesus told his disciples, **"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you,"** (Acts 1:8) and that promise applies to us, too. We have the

authority to announce the forgiveness of sins. As we stand fast in the Word we have the power to take a stand even against Satan and resist him. Our prayers have power, too. James wrote that **"the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."** (James 5:16) As Paul reminded Timothy, it's not a spirit of timidity that God has given us, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. In that amazing way that he has, God can actually perfect his strength by means of our weakest moments.

At the end of this chapter we have the call of Elisha. Elisha was to succeed Elijah as prophet in Israel. Elisha was apparently a wealthy farmer, since we find him here plowing with twelve yoke of oxen. Then along comes Elijah and drapes his mantle over Elisha and suddenly Elisha has something else to do. He's been called to be a prophet. Elisha probably didn't have a clue as to all that Elijah had just been through, how Elijah had been on the verge of giving up. If he'd known, would he have been so quick to burn the plowing equipment and slaughter the oxen and kiss his parents good-bye and follow Elijah? I don't know. But at least now Elijah couldn't say anymore, *"I am the only one left."* God was showing him that wasn't true.

3. Loneliness - Fellowship

It was undoubtedly lonely having to take a stand as a prophet. Not too many people want to be your friend when the king is after your head. It was lonely out there at the Kerith Ravine where the ravens brought food to Elijah as he hid from Ahab. It was lonely over in Gentile territory in Sidon where the prophet had just a widow and her son as companions. What Elijah didn't realize, however, is that there were many others who still shared his faith in the true God. The LORD said, *"Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."* The preceding chapter of 1 Kings tells us that another prophet named Obadiah was hiding 100 prophets of the LORD in two caves to shield them from the deadly wrath of King Ahab.

Of course, part of Elijah's loneliness was self-inflicted. By running to Horeb as he had, he had removed himself from all possibility of fellowship. But it can be lonely as a believer. It can be lonely to be the only student in your class who speaks up for God's Word, the only employee in your workplace who speaks up for God's ways and will. It can be lonely to be a single Christian or to be a Christian married to someone who doesn't share your faith.

When that feeling that we're in this all alone strikes, then we have to go to God's Word to be reassured that we are not alone. The LORD told Moses that he wasn't alone as the Israelites appeared to be trapped between the Red Sea and the charging Egyptian cavalry. When Joshua was hesitant to serve as Moses' successor, God told him, **"Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."** (Josh. 1:9) And in the last verse of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has told us the same thing: **"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."** (Matt. 28:20b) In addition, God has provided for our fellowship needs by giving us the encouragement of fellow believers. It's because the Lord doesn't intend for us to live our Christianity in isolation that he caused the author of Hebrews to write, **"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."** (10:24-25)

So what would you think if we ran an ad about the Christian faith that said, *"Wanted: Men, women, and children for a delightful journey heavenward. Say good-bye to all your hardships and adversities; become a Christian and experience an unbroken series of triumphs in every aspect of your life, culminating in the joy of heaven?"* I think you'd say—wouldn't you?—that such a description of Christianity would be misleading. The Bible doesn't tell us that Christians are exempt from hardships. In fact, it says that the way to heaven's glory is through hardship. But behind those hardships is the glory of being a believer now and the glory that awaits us in heaven. And for all the perceptions of weakness and the periods of loneliness that may at times afflict believers, there is also for us Christians the knowledge that God's power is at work right now in the message of his crucified and risen Son. Through Jesus we have fellowship with God right now and a glorious fellowship to come in heaven. Amen.